

# The Cultural Self-Objectivation Hypothesis

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## Abstract

This paper proposes the *Cultural Self-Objectivation Hypothesis*, which argues that expatriates may experience a regression to infantile narcissistic phases due to narcissistic injury caused by cultural dissonance, leading to *cultural cathexis* (i.e., the projection of their *self*, a key constituent of the psychic apparatus, onto their native or the host culture). Drawing on Heinz Kohut's concept of *self-object transference* (a psychic phenomenon in which patients project their *self* onto their therapists) and from psychoanalytic theory, *Cultural Self-Objectivation* (CSO) is hypothesized to be manifested in either *auto-alienating* or *xeno-alienating* form. The first chapter of this paper describes the CSO phenomenon; the second chapter analyzes the two proposed manifestations of the phenomenon; the third chapter compares CSO with concepts from John Berry's *Model of Acculturation* (i.e., *assimilation*, *integration*, *separation*, and *marginalization*) and establishes that CSO is a distinct phenomenon. This paper's primary contribution lies in delineating the theoretical framework of the *Cultural Self-Objectivation Hypothesis*, providing a foundation for future research and empirical studies on the topic.

## Keywords

Cultural Self-Objectivation — Cultural cathexis — Self-object transference  
Self cathexis — Cross-cultural — Psychoanalysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Heinz Kohut developed the concept of *self*, a cohesive, nuclear “structure within the mind,” formed via empathetic mirroring and idealization, and dependent on *self-objects* (i.e., individuals whom one’s *self* is projected onto) for stability (Kohut 1971). Central to this paper is the concept of *self-object transference*, which describes an intrapsychic dynamic in which patients unconsciously seek to compensate for underdeveloped aspects of their *self*, originating from a lack of healthy interactions with caregivers during childhood, through interactions with their therapists in adulthood, effectively projecting their *self* onto the therapist (Kohut 1971).

This paper hypothesizes that, akin to the *self-object transference* observed in therapeutic contexts as studied by Kohut (1971), living in a foreign culture can trigger similar maladaptive responses, reactivating infantile narcissistic tendencies and prompting similar *self-object transferences* due to an unconscious defensive process to protect one’s *self-image*. In such a context, the *self* may be projected onto a culture, a phenomenon that is here called *cultural self-objectivation* (CSO), i.e., treating a culture as one’s *self-object*, or “object of

*love*.” During the emergence of CSO, either one’s native culture or the host culture can be treated as the *self-object*, eliciting different narcissistic responses.

Moreover, since cultural differences are threatening to individuals’ *self-image* due to insufficiency (or absence) of validation, this work proposes that the intensity of such maladaptive narcissistic responses correlates with the cultural gap between societies (e.g., values, beliefs, social practices, communication styles). Japan, for instance, exhibits cultural traits distinct from those of most countries, especially in the dimensions of individualism, masculinity, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Yamamura, Satoh, and Stedham 2003; Hofstede 2010), thus being predicted to elicit stronger narcissistic responses.

## DEFINING CULTURAL SELF-OBJECTIVATION

The *self* originates in individuals' mental apparatus, emerging from the interplay between individuals' experiences (environmental forces) and the psychic organization and its constituents (ego, id, and superego); the *self* is not a mental agency but a constructed structure; hence, multiple *self-representations* may coexist within the same individual, although they may hold contradictory natures of grandiosity and inferiority at the same time in different levels of consciousness (Kohut 1971, xv).

This is a complex dynamic encompassing the intricacies of the individuals' mental apparatus and their own *phenomenological reality*, i.e., individuals' *perceived reality* (in opposition to *objective reality*), which is the primary driver of human behavior (Rogers 1995, 23). The formation of the *self* is dependent on individuals' interpretations of the symbolic value that they ascribe to their life events, resulting in different notions of *self* from individual to individual despite similarities in genetics, nationality, and life experiences.

This work proposes the concept of *Cultural Self-Objectivation* (CSO), a phenomenon similar to Kohut's *self-object*

*transference* in the sense that mature individuals regress to infantile narcissistic phases in which they developed latent narcissistic traits, but distinct in that instead of their *self* being projected onto their therapists, it is projected onto either their native or their host culture. This reaction is hypothesized to emerge in the intercultural context of expatriation.

CSO builds upon Kohut's interpretation of the nature of narcissism, in which narcissism extends beyond *ego cathexis* (i.e., self-focused attention) to a *self cathexis* (i.e., investment in external objects—the *self-objects*) (Kohut 1971, xiv). Such *self-objects* invariably serve a vital function in individuals' mental apparatus: the preservation of a cohesive image of the individual, also contributing to individuals' self-esteem and psychological well-being. The proposed hypothesis argues that the *self*, a nuclear constituent of psychic organization, can be projected onto culture due to an unconscious regression to an infantile narcissistic phase triggered by cultural differences—hence, the self-objectivation of the culture, i.e., a *cultural cathexis*.

Kohut's conceptualization of narcissism in therapeutic context frames the therapist as individuals' *self-object*, which is actually a substitute for the original infantile *self-objects*, usually the child's caregivers.

Patients may exhibit different stances toward the analyst according to their own psychic condition, i.e., an expression of a more or less archaic developmental phase (Kohut 1971, 114–116).

That said, these are the three forms of *self-object transference* as identified by Kohut (1971, 114–116):

- *Merger transference*: the patients see the therapist as an extension of themselves.
- *Alter-ego/twinship transference*: the patients believe that the analyst's psychical structure and functioning are similar to their own.
- *Mirror transference*: despite perceiving the analyst as a separate entity, patients intensely seek the therapist's validation.

That said, CSO is proposed to be manifested in two types of *self-objectivation* in cross-cultural context:

- *Auto-alienating*: individuals project their *self* onto their host culture, alienating themselves from their native culture.
- *Xeno-alienating*: individuals project their *self* onto their native culture, alienating themselves from the host culture.

## DEFINING THE TYPES OF CULTURAL SELF- OBJECTIVATION

### *On Auto-alienating Cultural Self-Objectivation*

CSO is here considered as *auto-alienating* when individuals project their *self* onto the host culture. This results in an intense attachment to the host culture and a detachment from the native culture.

Such attachment, however, is superficial and ephemeral in nature, manifested through rapid behavioral shifts (e.g., sudden adoption of host culture speaking habits, dressing customs, culinary tastes) and a merely performative adoption of symbols from the host culture without internalizing its deeper meanings (e.g., wearing host country national flag apparel without comprehending its symbolism and history, enthusiastically celebrating major national holidays without observing or showing interest in understanding its accompanying traditions).

The narcissistic individual does not seek to actually *assimilate* into the host culture, instead expecting solely its members' validation as a means of validating their own *self-image*. In fact, the host culture is actually a mere temporary substitute for its native culture.

This is a dynamic paralleling Kohut's *mirror transference*, for the individual unconsciously tasks members of the host culture with reflecting back a cohesive *self-image* in order that the narcissistic individual can feel validated.

This projection of the *self*, being defensive in nature, tends to collapse when the host culture fails to function as the idealized *self-object* (e.g., when the individual faces rejection from the members of the host culture). Furthermore, as this *cultural cathexis* is ephemeral, individuals may want to be again regarded by their fellow native ethnic-cultural members as one of them when regressing to their homeland as a means of maintaining the cohesiveness of their auto-image.

### *On Xeno-alienating Cultural Self-Objectivation*

CSO is considered *xeno-alienating* when individuals project their *self* onto their own native culture, resulting in a resentful detachment from the host culture and an intense adherence to their native culture. This leads to a vehement rejection of customs from the host culture, a refusal to internalize any of such culture's constituents (e.g., language, tradition, social customs), a stance of

disdain towards its expressions, and an idealization of one's own native habits, symbols, rituals, and traditions. Such individuals become unreceptive to a variety of inputs (e.g., linguistic, religious, social, emotional) from the host culture.

Such cultural rejection, however, is superficial in nature, since it is not an identity-driven, conscious preference for the native culture, but rather an unconscious, defensive reaction from the psychic apparatus to narcissistic injury.

The rejection of the host culture is presumed to be triggered by the inability to grasp the expressions from the host country, for such expressions and their deeper meanings can only be completely understood by long-term cultural immersion (Hofstede 2010, p. 6–9). In other words, individuals exhibiting *xeno-alienating* CSO are hypothesized to be experiencing a conflict between their narcissistic needs and host culture expressions, which seem incomprehensible to them.

## CONTRASTING CULTURAL SELF- OBJECTIVATION WITH JOHN BERRY'S ACCULTURATION FRAMEWORK

At first glance, CSO may seem conceptually similar to John Berry's *Model of Acculturation*. It becomes thus imperative to clarify the important aspects in which both frameworks differ. For that reason, let us consider the concepts from Berry's model according to Berry et al. (2006):

- *Assimilation*: the adoption of a different culture, with little interest in maintaining the native culture.
- *Integration*: the maintenance of the native culture while adopting a different culture.
- *Separation*: maintenance of native culture while avoiding interpersonal involvement.
- *Marginalization*: no interest in maintaining the native culture nor in interacting with a different culture.

All of these are gradual, cognitive, and identity-driven behavioral reactions: the individual consciously seeks to adopt or reject the host culture as a strategy to resolve their cultural conflict, leading to either an integrated bicultural identity or a

sustained separation from either culture—or even both cultures (Zee and Oudenhoven 2022).

CSO, on the other hand—as shown in the table on the subsequent page—is an unconscious defensive reaction to narcissistic injury triggered by cultural discrepancies, leading to a *cultural cathexis* that is neither deep nor sustained, but transient and superficial. Such *cultural cathexis* has the sole goal of preserving and validating the cohesiveness of the *self-image* and may suddenly dissolve when the *self-object*—either the native or the host culture—fails to validate the narcissistic individuals' *self-image*. For instance, while *cultural assimilation* is correlated with long-term language proficiency and social network integration (Berry et al. 2006), *auto-alienating* CSO predicts discontinuity in language acquisition engagement.

In the table offered on the subsequent page, key aspects of the *Cultural Self-Objectivation Hypothesis* and Berry's *Model of Acculturation* are contrasted in order to elucidate their fundamental divergences.

*Table 1: Key Differences Between CSO and Berry's Acculturation Framework*

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Cultural Self-Objectivation</i>	<i>John Berry's Framework</i>
<b>Theoretical Basis</b>	Psychoanalytic	Social psychology Cognitive psychology
<b>Primary Mechanism</b>	Unconscious projection of the <i>self</i> onto culture	Conscious strategy to resolve cultural conflict
<b>Underlying Dynamics</b>	Narcissistic regression Self-object transference Cultural cathexis	Stress adaptation Identity negotiation
<b>Behavioral Manifestation</b>	Ephemeral adaptation or alienation Superficial assimilation or rejection	Sustained adaptation or alienation Genuine assimilation or rejection
<b>Emotional Drivers</b>	Narcissistic injury Self-image validation	Pragmatic adjustment
<b>Temporal Stability</b>	Unstable Transient	Stable Enduring
<b>Outcome</b>	Transitory and reversible adaptation Transitory and reversible rejection	Integrated bicultural identity Sustained separation or marginalization

## CONCLUSION

This paper proposed the *Cultural Self-Objectivation Hypothesis*, which argues that expatriates may experience a regression to infantile narcissistic phases due to narcissistic injury caused by cultural dissonance.

This phenomenon is hypothesized to be similar to Kohut's concept of *self-object transference*, a type of *self cathexis* where individuals project their *self* onto their therapists. During CSO, expatriate individuals instead undergo *cultural cathexis* (i.e., they project their *self* onto their native or the host culture) in an unconscious attempt to maintain the cohesiveness of their *self-image*.

CSO is hypothesized to have two different manifestations: *auto-alienating* and *xeno-alienating*. The first describes the projection of the *self* onto the host culture, leading to an alienation from the native culture. The latter refers to the projection of the *self* onto one's own native culture, leading to an alienation from the host culture.

Both forms of CSO are distinct from the concepts of *cultural assimilation*, *integration*, *separation*, and *marginalization* as developed by John Berry. This is because Berry's concepts refer to conscious strategies on the part of

expatriates to deal with the challenges presented by the host culture and lead to enduring, identity-driven adaptations (Berry et al. 2006). Conversely, CSO is an unconscious defensive reaction to narcissistic injury triggered by cultural differences, leading to superficial and ephemeral adaptations that have the sole goal of preserving and validating individuals' *self-image*.

As previously stated, this paper's primary contribution lies in delineating the theoretical framework of the *Cultural Self-Objectivation Hypothesis*, providing a foundation for future research on the topic. Further research and empirical studies are now needed, especially in countries such as Japan, which demonstrates exceptional cultural distance to the majority of both Western and Eastern countries (Yamamura, Satoh and Stedham 2003; Hofstede 2010) and is thus hypothesized as particularly able to trigger the narcissistic reactions here described.



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